

Helping Bullied Children

NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention/www.njbullying.org/(908) 522-2581, Stuart Green

(1) *Most childhood bullying takes place in schools and the primary cause of bullying is the characteristics of the school*, in particular whether school leaders and staff take effective steps to prevent bullying and to address it when it occurs. For that reason, the *best* way to help bullied children is to expect and insist that schools address bullying adequately. It is not enough for a school to have 'a policy' or some approach - the particulars matter a lot. The current evidence strongly suggests that the most effective approach to school bullying is a school-wide approach which strengthens school culture/improves school climate. (For more information about this intervention, and other evidence-based approaches, see the NJ Coalition website:

www.njbullying.org; the National School Climate Center at www.schoolclimate.org; Responsive Classroom at www.responsiveclassroom.org; the US government website:

www.stopbullying.gov; writings by the creator of the first 'whole school' model, Dan Olweus:

e.g., *Bullying at School*; and for an especially well written and practical description of what schools ought to be doing, see the book *Schools Where Everyone Belongs* by Stan Davis (or visit his website: www.stopbullyingnow.com).

(2) *Efforts to change bullied children's behavior* (e.g., by telling them to ignore the bullying, avoid the bullying children, use humor when bullied, fight back, etc.) *will usually not effectively prevent or address bullying*. This is because bullying *always* involves an *imbalance of power* between the bullying and bullied child/children - by definition it is difficult for the bullied child to defend or protect themselves. Further, such changes in longstanding and natural (for the child) behavior patterns are difficult to achieve and unlikely to occur because a parent or others tells (however supportively) the child to change.

(3) Social skills training and other therapies, character education work, 'social planning' (involving children in activities with other children), parent training, etc. *can* be effective sources of change, strength and improved functioning *in children with known problems and vulnerabilities*. Factors addressed which may be especially relevant to bullying include facilitating friendships (which buffers and may prevent some bullying) and reducing emotional reactivity (which some studies suggest attracts and maintains bullying behavior). Ideally, children who could benefit should receive such services. *But the evidence is weak that such change prevents or ends most bullying* (see point #2, above).

In addition, initiating such methods *in response* to a child's being bullied (as school staff sometimes suggest, with good intentions) inevitably communicates to the bullied child that they (their behavior or characteristics) are the cause of the bullying. This is not accurate and also 'blames the victim.' Many children bullied have no social skills deficits or any characteristic which can be changed readily or at all (e.g., shortness, learning problems, special health needs or developmental problems, poverty, being in a cultural or racial minority). And protecting children with such characteristics or conditions from bullying should be a priority responsibility of schools, whether or not such characteristics are - or can be - changed.

(4) Schools must actively support the bullied child (including protecting them from retaliation for telling) and provide reasonable, consistent, escalating (per incident) consequences for the bullying child, and an opportunity to reflect on the behavior and harm done. Bullying is an urgent matter, analgous to an assault of the bullied child (or, in a continuing relationship, to partner violence), and requires an urgent, serious response.

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So what (*in addition to a more effective school approach*) helps bullied children?

(1) Telling a trusted adult is helpful *if* adults (especially school staff) understand bullying and are prepared to effectively address it. (Parents of bullied children talking directly to the *bullying* child/children's parents is rarely helpful and may make matters worse.)

(2) Parents should ask their child how children treat them at school. Listening is more important than advice. When parents hear children (including their own) speak badly of another child, *gently* express discomfort and empathy for the scorned child.

(3) Be involved in and present at your child's school; don't wait to be invited, ask to volunteer.

(4) Other children can be very effective (as 'upstanders') in supporting and protecting bullied children. (But 'peer mediation' is *not* recommended for bullying.) Schools can be very effective in 'activating' bystander children and creating positive (new) relations between bullied children and other children. Methods such as collaborative learning, and friendship circles, as well as helping bystander children discourage bullying through non-participation (e.g., as an 'audience' for bullying incidents), telling trusted adults, or actively supporting bullied children (through inclusion in their activities) all work well. Schools are familiar with these (and other) methods for supporting bullied (and all) children, but the methods are very underutilized in most schools.

(5) Get together with other parents of children who have been bullied; take action together. Meet (as a group of parents) with the principal and other school leaders; ask specifically about the school's approach to bullying. Compare the school's approach with a model (see 'Guide for School Administrators' and other materials at www.njbullying.org). Raise your expectations: expect your school to effectively address bullying. (Free training for school staff is available through the NJ State Bar Foundation at 732 249-5000.)

(6) Consider seeking legal advice. If the bullying is bias-based, contact NJ Division on Civil Rights at www.njcivilrights.gov.

(7) Don't accept adult leaders who bully, including teachers and coaches; speak out, insist on change (in the behavior or the person).

(8) Consider changing schools, if possible, as a last resort.

For further information, contact:

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